

Inside Report . . . By Rowland Evans and Robert Novak

The Porter Report

BEHIND President Johnson's all but final decision to step up the air war against North Vietnam is a series of new reports from Saigon, including one from William J. Porter, Deputy U.S. Ambassador in Saigon.

Porter, whose special responsibility is the political and economic reconstruction program (now called "revolutionary development"), reported here last week that the so-called "nationalist" revolution of the Communist Vietcong is in fact a fraud, utterly lacking in broad, popular support.

This has further buttressed the President's unmistakeable conviction that, despite shrill and continuing protests against his policy in Vietnam, his course is the right one. Furthermore, along with the fact that Premier Nguyen Cao Ky has, at least temporarily, mastered the militant Buddhists, the Porter report has reinforced the President's conviction that his goal of a non-Communist Vietnam is attainable. All this lies behind the imminent escalation of bombing.

Ambassador Porter is a veteran of nationalist uprisings, or insurrections, in no less than four separate countries: Algeria, Morocco, Iraq and Syria. He is also one of this country's most qualified diplomatic trouble-shooters. Therefore, his personal report last week to the President and his top aides was backed by the rare credence of intimate exposure to the politics of nationalism. Porter has been in Saigon for more than six months.

The essence of Porter's report was that, in contrast to the experience of Algeria and Morocco, there is simply no evidence at all that the Communist-dominated National Liberation Front (NLF) in South Vietnam, and the Vietcong guerrillas that sustain it, represents genuine nationalism.

To the contrary, the NLF is a false front lacking anything like the tight discipline and the broad control over the population that marked the Algerian FLN, for instance.

THUS, efforts on two occasions by the NLF to call a national strike flopped. Thus, U.S. servicemen in the thousands can and do wander unarmed through the cities of South Vietnam without fear of murder.

Porter's assessment of the hardcore political strength of the NLF can't just be brushed off as making the facts fit the hope. Nor can the new assessment coming



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in from Saigon on the declining strength of the Buddhist activists be ignored as wishful thinking.

It now seems clear that the most militant of the Buddhist leaders, Thich Tri Quang, has lost considerable ground within the United Buddhist Church to the more moderate faction led by Thich Tam Chau. Tri Quang is the religious leader of perhaps a million Buddhists in Central Vietnam, but there is growing evidence that his religious hold over his followers is not duplicated in the field of politics.

At this writing, Tri Quang is on a hunger strike against Premier Ky's military junta (but seems to be surviving rather well on large quantities of nourishing fruit juices and tea generously laced with cream and sugar).

Tri Quang's militancy has deepened the split within the Buddhist Institute to a point that gives some U.S. experts hope of a fundamental reduction in the Institute's

power to make trouble. Discredited Buddhist activists pushing the Tri Quang line of militant hostility to the military junta may be losing their influence.

IF THIS is an accurate appraisal, it means that the more moderate Buddhist faction, headed by Thich Tam Chau whose power lies in the South, could become a most significant instrument in the work of reconstruction and development that is now making its first serious beginning in the countryside.

All this is in the background of the President's impending decision to step up the air war, details of which are still a tightly-held secret. With the apparent resolution of the five-month-old political crisis coupled with the Porter report, the mood in Washington has undergone subtle change.

Now the overall Vietnam problem may be on the threshold of a slow but steady improvement as President Johnson continues his hard, unwavering policy of resistance to aggression from the North. His refusal to waver despite the political onslaught against him at home may soon begin to pay small but important dividends—both at home and abroad.

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